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ABSTRACT

Providing an example of educational practice others may wish to emulate, this bulletin profiles the work of Elga Brown, an extraordinary kindergarten teacher at Edison Elementary School in Eugene, Oregon. The basic educational objective of Brown's classroom is that every one has a good day, and the overriding rule is that everyone allow everyone else to have a good day. Participants practice self-government. At the start of each day, each child chooses two activities, negotiates access to activity areas, and quickly begins to create activities within those areas. Although Elga Brown intervenes to extend development, self-direction lies at the root of children's involvement. Children are encouraged to be inquisitive, ask questions and go beyond simple answers. This makes the world fascinating and encourages the children to explore it. Brown's approach to the children is warm and respectful, not patronizing or condescending. Her tone is genuine and friendly. She is alert and responsive to every activity in the classroom. Brown's criticism is neither strongly negative nor strongly positive. Children do not work for her approval. Interactions are characterized by mutual respect. Children learn by experience and through their senses. Appended is an ERIC Digest entitled "What Should Young Children Be Learning?" by Lilian G. Katz. (RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO KINDERGARTEN
Profile of an Expert Teacher

Amy Klauke

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Oregon School Study Council
April 1988 • Volume 31, Number 8

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Preface

At a time when many Oregon school districts, in response to a state mandate, are planning to launch kindergarten programs, this Bulletin presents an inspiring vision of an approach to kindergarten that many districts might wish to emulate.

As this profile of Elga Brown so compellingly demonstrates, a kindergarten teacher has the vitally important role of instilling in young children a love for learning.

Readers of last month's OSSC Bulletin, *Developing Children's Creativity, Thinking, and Interests: Strategies for the District, School, and Classroom,* by Leonora M. Cohen, will note that Brown and her classroom incarnate many of Cohen's principles. These two Bulletins appropriately complement each other.

Amy Klauke was commissioned by OSSC to write this Bulletin. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Oregon and works for the Lane Regional Arts Council as an artist in education.

Philip K. Piele
Executive Secretary

Contents

	Preface	iii
	Introduction	1
	Prologue	3
1.	**Self-Government**	5
2.	**Self-Direction**	9
3.	**Encouraging Natural Curiosity**	13
4.	**Mutual Respect**	15
5.	**I Learn When I Do**	17
6.	**Learning Through the Senses**	19
7.	**Stretching**	21
	Conclusion	25
	References	27
	Interviews	29
	Appendix: What Should Young Children Be Learning?	31

Introduction

This Bulletin focuses on the work of an extraordinary kindergarten teacher at Edison Elementary School in Eugene, Oregon. Elga Brown has long been loved by parents and admired by educators for the seeming magic she creates in her classroom. It is my hope that the following pages will elucidate a bit of how that magic happens and inspire anyone working with young children.

This study is a timely one, as Oregon law requires that school districts offer kindergarten by July 1, 1989. Recent stances toward the education of young children differ widely. "Parents desire the best for their child," says Jan Jipson, assistant professor of early childhood education at the University of Oregon. "They're confused by the many inputs, from popular media emphasizing the competitive edge, to the resultant voices of alarm from educators concerned with a child's total development."

Many parents are stressing early enrollment in kindergarten and pressuring their children to read at younger and younger ages, believing this will give their children "a head start" toward later professional success. In a publication of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education titled "What Should Young Children Be Learning?" Lilian G. Katz refutes this sentiment:

> The risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age will undermine children's dispositions to be readers. It is clearly not useful for a child to learn skills if, in the process of acquiring them, the disposition to use them is lost.

Others practice "red-shirting," placing their children in school a year late to ensure they are first in their class. Still others believe rule-laden, rigid curricula produce good citizens and thus preclude later deviant behavior. Larry Schweinhart of the High Scope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan, argues that a positive atmosphere is more likely to lead to a sense of social responsibility: "If, in the early school years, children gain the fundamental values of self-worth and respect for themselves, they're more prepared later to be responsive to other value messages."

"Impetus for the national trend toward earlier education," says Margaret Nichols, superintendent of Eugene Public Schools, "comes in part from the global economic situation, from competition with countries where formal instruction and academic pressure lead to earlier academic success." Such "success" is measured by standardized tests, which are quite narrow indications of educational accomplishment, she believes. Many schools have adopted Headstart style programs, taking a model useful for disadvantaged children and applying it to kids who would benefit more from a less rigid curriculum. Such attitudes, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) says, promote

> the increasingly widespread demand for use of inappropriate formal teaching techniques for young children, over-emphasis on achievement of narrowly defined academic skills, and increased reliance on psychometric tests to determine enrollment and retention in programs.

Instead of such formal instruction, the NAEYC advises teachers to "prepare the environment so that it provides stimulating, challenging materials and activities for children." Then teachers can "closely observe to see what children understand and pose additional challenges to push their thinking further." In a similar vein, the Oregon Department of Education says it is unwise "to divide the kindergarten day into distinct times for individual subjects such as math, reading, art, and social studies. Children learn concepts from the various subject areas through a variety of integrated experiences" (*Kindergartens in Oregon*).

It is in this spirit of integrating experiences—synthesizing rather than dissecting—that I have organized this report on Elga Brown's classroom. At several places throughout the Bulletin, quotations from the literature on the education of young children complement the classroom observations.

Although chapters are assigned loose subject headings, most often the value in these scenes is found in their multidimensional qualities, in the many skills developing simultaneously, and in the informed, individualized attention Elga gives each child as she protects and nurtures this greatest gift—our natural sense of wonder at, confidence in, and enjoyment of ourselves and our world.

Prologue

"Come have a good time"

A common saying in Eugene has been that parents take their new babies right out of Sacred Heart Hospital and sign them up for Elga's kindergarten class. (A parent)

I settled in to read Elga Brown's seven-page proposal for an alternative kindergarten in Eugene, Oregon, unprepared for the deep agreement I would sense with her philosophy. It made so much human sense. I was equally astonished by how immediately comfortable I became in Elga's class the next day.

She'd called the night before, "Well, just come have a good time."

Chapter One

Self-Government

"We can both cook if you want to"

The room was small, but the various nooks gave it dimension and mystery, each area having its own character but seeming to allow the possibility to expand or transform into something else. There were relatively few materials: blocks, paper, books (*Chess for Children* was one), and, oddly, not much children's art on the walls. An emphasis on process, I thought, as I began to observe some of it.

The kids filtered in with their parents, many of whom stayed to observe or play games with the children or chat with Elga, who asked about their new babies or when they could meet for a conference. "I like to allow a transition period," Elga said. "Parents feel comfortable coming in and participating a bit instead of leaving their children off at the door."

I loitered in the child-sized kitchen, noticing a menu on one of the tables. (It had, Elga explained, been a restaurant the day before. "We thought up a few entrees and made a menu," she said, "then we had to figure out the recipes.")

A girl named Audrey was sitting in the playhouse alone (children's names are fictional throughout the Bulletin), while a boy named Peter measured out unknown substances and stirred them in an empty frying pan. "Don't worry," he assured me, "she's just being nervous in there," and poured his creation carefully onto two plates. He then went over to Audrey and said, "We can both cook if you want. You can help count the ingredients." Audrey looked steadily out the plastic window and replied, "Thanks. I'll wait." Peter cleaned up and then Audrey cooked up a storm.

> "*The relationships between the child and the various other persons in his environment play a basic role in the formation of ethical feelings.*"
> (Jean Piaget)

Elga calls her curriculum *integrated*, meaning that math, science, and language, rather than being segregated into subject areas, are learned through

the extension of children's own interests, along with other forms of development. But rather than describe her style, she'll point to examples of the kids' activities. For example, Peter and Audrey were developing different skills through their kitchen experience. Right away they illustrated a certain self-determination in heading directly to the cooking area, earnestly beginning and finishing a chosen task.

> *"When the child completes co-ordinated actions directed toward a given end, when he achieves something he set out to do, when he repeats patiently his exercises, he is training his positive will-power.... Since, when a command to do a certain thing is given, we presuppose a corresponding active or inhibitive power of the child, it is plain that obedience must follow the formation of the will."* (Montessori)

Peter and Audrey used math skills to measure out the ingredients and then visualization —a skill growing flaccid in our TV and video era, according to Elga—to imagine the ingredients and their transformation into a meal. Perhaps cooperation was the most important learning in this encounter. Peter anticipated Audrey's concerns and responded generously and respectfully, offering to share the stove. He was also able to view Audrey as a helper and peer educator: "You can help me count the ingredients."

Audrey learned to work out her disappointment without taking it out on Peter or demanding her way. Here was an example of what Constance Kamii (in her book with Rheta Devries) calls autonomy, self-governing, "the mutual regulation of desires, or negotiations, to work out decisions that seem right to all concerned," as opposed to heteronomy, being governed by someone else.

> *"Fewer isolated individuals are found in classrooms where activities are built around projects in which peers can establish skills for collaboration and activity partnership.* (Hallinan, in"The Development of Social Competence in Children")

Unlike some other classrooms where practicing to be tidy, following teacher's directions, and obeying authority are primary objectives, children in Elga's class are developing self-esteem and learning how to think, make decisions, cooperate, appreciate, and create. Moreover, they are learning through participation in the dynamics of their society.

> *"The task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility, and evil with activity, as often happens in the case of old-time discipline. And all this because our aim is to discipline for activity, for work, for good; not for immobility, not for passivity, not for obedience."* (Montessori)

"Well, what are the objectives ?" I ask Elga.

"That everyone has a good day."

"And your rules?"

"That everyone allow everyone else to have a good day."

"But aren't there any ground rules?" I ask, "No Hitting! No Breaking Toys! No Paint on the Walls!"

"Do you see anyone doing those things?"

"We don't think those activities would contribute to a good day," Elga explains. "We do go through the play areas and discuss what people using this space or these materials need to know how to do."

> *"Only a social life among the students themselves—that is, self-government taken as far as possible and parallel to the intellectual work carried out in common—will lead to his double development of personalities, masters of themselves and based on mutual respect.... Conversely, if their ethics consist exclusively in submission to adult authority, and if the only social exchanges that make up the life of the class are those that bind each student individually to a master holding all power, they will not know how to be intellectually alive."* (Piaget)

The block boxes each require two people to carry them. This means, Elga says, that "each child has to be aware of how the other one is moving her or his body, watch the direction that person is going, and make adjustments. Children who have difficulty may need to learn how to take another child's point of view."

Similarly, Elga points out that the kitchen has one set of dishes for two tables. Since the requirement is for everyone to have a good day, children have to work out compromises between themselves. "This is negotiation," she says, "and their solution does not need to please me. It only has to satisfy each participant."

To help children resolve their interpersonal conflicts, Elga has set up talking and listening chairs. "And, of course, there are times I have to discuss their behavior with them," she says. I witnessed one of those times after

Mickey, it seemed, had instigated a fist fight on the playground.

"But Larry was hogging the play structure," Mickey said.

"Is pushing someone over a good way to solve a problem?" Elga asked quietly.

"I could've called him a jerk instead."

"But why would you do that?"

"To make him mad," Mickey said.

"Is making someone mad a good way to solve a problem?"

"No."

"Mickey, there's only one person who's in charge of you. Do you know who that is? Let me introduce him to you," Elga said, taking Mickey's hands and shaking them together. "Mickey, this is Mickey, the only one who can really keep you from fighting on the playground. Did you know that?"

Mickey just grinned ruefully, keeping hold of Elga's hand as they walked back to class.

"Children at this age are just beginning to become aware of other people as sentient beings," Elga said. "My job is to help them learn social rules, to make sure everyone protects each other's rights, and to set an example of respectful, empathetic interaction."

Chapter Two

Self-Direction

"I'll take thirteen stacks of ten blocks"

"Our system teaches teachers to externally motivate students," says Elga. "I would rather encourage their intrinsic motivation. Often adults suspect that they have to make children learn or they'll waste time just 'playing.' They think they have to artificially motivate them."

Elga believes that standardized skill assessment comes from that same desire to control the learning process:

> Just because these specific skills are measurable doesn't equate them with real learning, which is beyond measurement and not in our control. Of course, we can affect development, we can nurture or stifle it, and even assess it. But we must understand it broadly and individually, rather than boxing it up and pretending we've caught it.

Elga plays a tune on her xylophone signalling the start of the class. She has a special tune also for "Stop and Listen Please" and another for "Please Sit Down." Children learn to distinguish these the first day. Lois, whose special day it is, will take the attendance list to the office. "I like to familiarize students with other areas and people in the school and them with us," Elga explains. Lois then calls on students, who each choose two activities for the morning.

"I'll take thirteen stacks of ten blocks."

"And how many is that Roy?"

"One hundred and forty." (Elga tells me later that Roy confuses the "th" and "f" sounds sometimes)

"I want playhouse first, then clay," says Loren.

"Rita and Jerome have playhouse first, Loren. Can you do clay first?"

"All right."

After each child has negotiated a learning area, they go directly to their given place. No one stands around waiting for further direction or complaining about their lot. They are free to create their own activities within those areas. Later, I ask Elga if some students always choose the same activity, tending to "play to their strengths."

"If that happens I wait until I understand what's motivating that tendency," Elga says. "One has to know the music as well as the words. A child may just be in the habit of asking for clay and may be happy to try something completely new. Or, if they just love clay, for instance, rather than discourage that, I try to build other skill learning into that area."

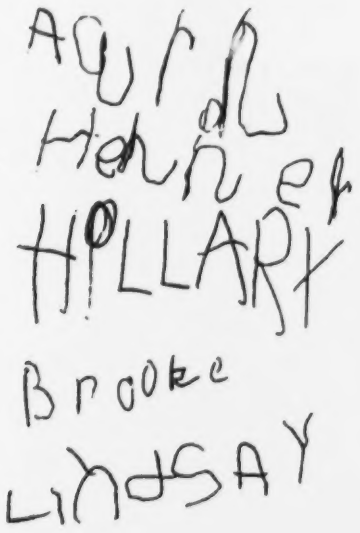
> *"By education must be understood the active help given to the normal expansion of the life of the child."* (Montessori)

Elga draws my attention to Jamie. "His mind moves faster than his articulation," she explains, so he usually chooses games. "Today I asked him to explain the game carefully to other children. That way there's a purpose to his speaking, for others and himself (after all, he does want them to play)." Besides physical movements, Jamie today is "learning to communicate, to understand another person's questions, and to present information logically and coherently," Elga said. "This way children use words from their own world, words, as Paulo Freire teaches, that are already charged with tangible meaning."

> *"Kindergarten teachers provide a language 'bath' for children, to such an extent that their language curriculum becomes hard to distinguish...it becomes seamless. Real-life and lesson language blend with music, science, math, art, play and so on, and are truly at the center of classroom life."* (Genishi, in *Kindergarten Curriculum*, Oregon Department of Education)

> *"Reading/writing is approached as a natural extension of the children's experiences. We can record information from the block area. We can write and deliver mail in the playhouses. We can write to the secretary, principal, nurse, or custodian as we need their help. We can write down things we need and things we should remember. We can write stories and read our own stories or books by others. In this program the goal is to enable children to see themselves as literate people who can use reading/writing for their own needs. Their confidence and sense of achievement grows out of their satisfaction in learning a useful process, irrespective of the particular level of the individual child."* (Elga Brown, "Alternative Kindergarten Proposal")

The afternoon class came in and asked what I was writing in my little notebook. "Notes about this class," I said, "Would you sign it?" I was quickly surrounded by waving pencils as several children confidently wrote their names for me each in their own style:



"Did you ever notice how young children prefer upper case letters?" Elga asked. "It's because they're more dependable. Lower case letters change their identity when they change position. A "b" upside-down is a "p."

Because children are still developing small muscle skills, Elga says she does not use lined paper in this class.

> We don't do practice drills on letters, either. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we responded to all children's writing (and I mean by this the entire continuum, from scribbles and hieroglyphics to paragraphs and essays) with the same acceptance and enthusiasm with which we hear their first words? If we corrected beginning speech the way we correct beginning writing, no one would want to learn how to talk! Measuring up to a standard of correctness is just not important at this stage. We discuss how someone, when first learning something, does it differently than someone who's had lots of practice. Children want to communicate, and what's most important to them is that they understand their own message, that they can read it back to themselves, and then that the other person understands it. This is sense-making, as Leslie's doing right now.

Leslie, a pig-tailed girl in a blue sweatshirt, was patiently "making mail" for her classmates. After writing one of their names on each of her drawings, she'd match the names at the mailboxes and drop the cards in.

"They thought up the mailboxes last week," Elga said. "Look, there's one for you, and there's even some mail in it."

"We talk a lot about how to make guests feel comfortable here," she said.

Chapter Three

Encouraging Natural Curiosity

"Making mountains from molehills"

> *"We must make of teachers worshippers and interpreters of the spirit of nature."* (Montessori)

Born in Austria, Elga came to the U.S. as a child. She has an undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago. Her master's degree in education, with special emphasis on early childhood, is from the University of Oregon, where she taught basic writing to college students and first became fascinated by the "many flavors of intelligence."

> I was seeing individuals who were brilliant in unique ways, but, because they were not as adept verbally, had developed poor self-images. I wanted to work with young children before they had a chance to absorb that kind of message. I wanted to affirm and celebrate various kinds of intelligence. My own children were beginning school at that time, and I was increasingly amazed by them.

Elga has been teaching young children since 1970. In 1974, when Eugene adopted kindergartens into its public school system, she began teaching at Condon School, a public elementary school only a few blocks from the current location of her class. When Condon School closed in 1984 and the trend in early childhood education moved toward formal instruction and basic skill training instead of developmental programs, Elga, with tremendous parental support, wrote a proposal to the Eugene School District to offer her class as an alternative. "Although I don't know what's alternative about it," she told me. "All kindergartens should be this way." Her class has been housed in Edison Elementary School ever since.

"We're turning away about half the applicants every year," says Principal Karrin Calhoun, who has known Elga for fifteen years and has worked with her for three. "Parents used to camp out when it was on a first-come basis; now it's a lottery system," Calhoun said. "The only requirement is that they come visit the class before applying: otherwise anyone in 4-J is eligible, and

we get kids from all backgrounds."

"It's because Elga has the amazing capacity to bring out children's natural curiosity, and she understands that children develop at their own rate and in their own way. She'll find qualities and strengths in every one of them and make them aware of it. She may have the wildest, wooliest group to start out with, but she always somehow civilizes them. Within two months Elga's kids act like they can walk on water, because they believe they can!" Karrin said that as far as she knew no one's ever quit or been expelled from Elga's class. Parents love what happens to their kids there, she said, and they see how much their children love to go to school.

> *"A teacher who says, 'I want to see how much you can find out about something,' rather than, 'I want to see how well you can do,' encourages children to focus on what they are learning rather than on their performance, and how others will judge their performance."* (Katz)

"They're encouraged to be inquisitive, encouraged to ask questions and go beyond simple answers," Karrin said, "which makes the whole world fascinating and encourages them to explore it. Elga's famous for making mountains out of molehills, in the best sense."

To illustrate how Elga stimulates her students' curiosity, Karrin told me a story about the time Elga brought an owl's pellet to class. The kids learned how to take it apart together and examine every object inside. Most of them were bones, so they looked at a book on bones and decided these were mouse bones. Then they found a book on mouse bones and identified each one. They started feeling each other's bones and drew and cut out pictures of what each one felt like, talking about why they might be shaped that way. Finally they needed to connect them so they discussed how different items (like glue, tape, and paper clips) would affect movement, before deciding on staples for the joints. These kids made amazingly accurate human skeletons starting from an owl's pellet!

Karrin continued in her praise of Elga: "She's incredibly calm and consistent, strong in her belief in and respect for children, always defending their integrity. One will often come to my office with a self-written note, asking for tape, for example, and once I put a tiny sticker on the messenger's hand (kids like those so). Well, two minutes later Elga was at my door, 'Karrin, I would appreciate it if you would not do that. Those kids were interested in your human response, not some dumb sticker.' A very wise woman, Elga Brown."

Chapter Four

Mutual Respect

"We're all students and teachers here"

Elga says little. She speaks quietly, slowly, carefully, like the way she walks. "To learn my profession I draw on a clear memory of my childhood and an examination of my own processes as a learner through a variety of school environments. There are many examples I try not to repeat." When asked which books or theories particularly influenced her, she replied, "I'm influenced, in some way, by everything I read."

Perhaps the most wonderful aspect of Elga's approach is her warm, respectful manner with the kids. Neither "cute," patronizing nor condescending, hers is a genuine, friendly tone. Elga doesn't call her children "students" or "pupils." They call her Elga. "We're all teachers and students here. I'll tell them what I need to learn. For instance, I'm not good at watching time or bringing the whistle when we go outside. We help each other learn."

Although alert and responsive to every activity in the classroom, Elga imposes neither strongly negative nor positive criticism. She's encouraging and appreciative of their work without drawing attention to her opinion. It becomes obvious that the children are not working for her approval. They create, it seems, for the satisfaction of creating. And Elga openly enjoys participating in it, taking me around to see what the kids are doing.

"Leah, you made a basket, that's wonderful." (Leah had designed a paper basket with a bracelet attached to the handle so she could wear it on her wrist). In the case of especially exciting inventions, Elga may gather the children to hear.

"Rose has finished the story she's been writing and would like to share it with you." Elga had taken dictation for Rose, who authored and illustrated the following story, which she read to the class:

> The Growing Pumpkin
>
> There once was a pumpkin seed and he didn't know what he was. A little girl picked him up one day. The pumpkin seed said, "I do not know what I am. Will you plant me?"

And the little girl said, "Yes."

The next day the little girl planted the seed. She took a shovel with her and a watering can, and some sticks and thread to make a fence around it so no one could walk on it. She watered the seed, and she said, "Grow BIG, whatever you are!"

She covered him up with dirt. The sun shone and then the little pumpkin seed began to sprout. It grew.....and grew.....and grew.

Then it became Fall.

And then more sprouts and leaves came up.

And then the little pumpkin became a great big pumpkin. And then the little girl said, "Oh, I know who you are! You're a pumpkin!" And she named him Fred.

"Oh, now I remember," said Fred. "My mother was being carved for pumpkin pie and I jumped out.

The little girl said, "Can I use some of your seeds to make more pumpkins?" And she did.

As it was Valentine's Day, I was surprised at the lack of heart-shaped cards you'd expect to find in an elementary classroom on February 14, so I questioned Elga about it.

"This class belongs to everyone," Elga explained. "Not all children celebrate the same holidays or in the same way. Besides, the richness and power of ritual and the meaning attached to traditional artifacts might be absent or trivialized when celebrations occur outside their relevant cultural or family context."

A visitor was playing a game with the children (rarely a day goes by in Elga's class without at least one observer) and was exclaiming frequently about who was winning. His comments made no impact on the children, who, much to his astonishment, would help each other analyze moves or graciously allow a new player to take their place. The enjoyment of learning the game, it seemed, was satisfying enough.

"Puppet-makers, do you think you should take your puppets with you to lunch or leave them in your lockers?" Elga asked a group of kids who were working their way gleefully through piles of rags, buttons, carpet pieces, paper plates, and yarn to create their utterly diverse puppets.

"Take them with us."

"All right then, take them with you."

Chapter Five

I Learn When I Do

"Experience teaches them"

Ahren and Caleb were marching around a table with the stopwatch, measuring how long it took to go around once, then twice, and in each direction, then comparing the amounts of time.

> *"The process of filling in gaps involves the discovery or invention of some procedure to get from one side of the gap to the other."* (George Forman)

"Four and five year olds are learning to recognize more than one aspect of a situation," Elga explained. "They are learning to consider different qualities and relationships; and their learning isn't linear, which is another reason standard tests don't work. Young children work with real things to transform ideas, with new knowledge constantly reworking old knowledge. Verbal explanations don't sink in, rather, maturation and experience teach them," Elga said. "Doing the right thing at the right time, that's a primary part of my job, to increase the probabilities for that fission to occur."

0 + 0 =

"Chris and I worked this problem out together from the workbook she'd invented for me," Elga said. "Originally she thought the answer was 2. Then I put zero bubbles in each of her hands and asked, 'Now how many bubbles do you have?' She looked at one hand, 'Zero there,' and the other, 'and zero there.....Zero! I'll put a + because that's a lot of zero'."

0 + 0 = 0

"Most people don't realize the quality of engagement children can achieve. Remind me to tell you about Charles and the talking table." She picked up her

picnic basket, which doubles as a desk and a purse, and we went for coffee. When we arrived at the cafe, several people came up to chat with Elga. Later Jill Liedtke, an instructional aide for Elga's class for the past year and a parent of one of the kids in the class, told me that happens constantly: "Elga's somewhat of a legend in Eugene."

Settling into her chair, Elga grinned and shook her head in mild amazement. "Some years kids do drama everywhere, especially slapstick. I'm convinced now, that the beginning of humor is slapstick. If puppets fall over in ridiculous ways, for example, all the kids laugh. I finally realized they were demonstrating what they knew about life, by laughing at what was impossible."

"They also act out what's going on inside. We talk about what's happening in our lives, so the day Kyle told us he was afraid of big shadows in his room, we made shadow stories. We moved papercuts back and forth across a light, watching them get bigger and smaller and talked about how the same thing can look different when turned another way. This helped the shadows become more familiar and understandable. Creating some himself gave him power in the situation. Later, another child saw a large dark paper cut behind a smaller one and said, 'That reminds me of Kyle being afraid of the monster. They are learning to empathize'."

"So what about Charles?" I asked.

"He was considering the talking and listening chairs one day and we decided maybe they were having a conversation, one talking and the other listening. Suddenly Charles said wouldn't it be fun if you could have a friend who was a table and while you were working, you could have a conversation! So then we did that. He became the table and we put on a drama for the class.

"I hear you can talk, Table," I said. "How did you manage that?"

"I've always been able to talk," Charles said, " It's just that no one's ever spoken to me before."

"What do you eat?" Pat asked.

" I eat paper scraps from the floor."

"But how do you sleep?"

"I fold up my legs like a cow." And so on.

Chapter Six

Learning Through the Senses

"Real caterpillars"

Elga pointed to the paper box. "I choose open-ended, raw materials, things that can be expanded or used for endless creative purposes. This way they have more raw material from which to create, invent, and discover. Kids make secondary colors from primary ones. We do sand, clay, and water play. Blocks are all sizes, shapes, and weights, and we use a variety of textures, colors, and sizes of paper scraps collected from printers' waste bins."

> *"At the level of variation the child understands that the state, or quality, of an object is but a point along a continuum and that between any two points there is always another point."* (Forman)

Jill Liedtke told me, "Elga doesn't make the usual lesson plans; instead she's constantly bringing treasures in from the library, art museum, or her yard to enrich what themes originate from the children themselves." (I glance at the walking sticks and praying mantis.) "Also Elga goes on faith that all these wonderful things will come out of the air, and they do! Once we watched silkworms for a month, counting how many leaves they'd eaten each day. Kids bring in treasures, too, to share. So the class materials are constantly changing with the discoveries and interests of the group."

Off in a corner four children were creating pictures by placing colored pegs in holes. Sherri created a geometric pattern; Paul, a flower. Sue stuck the pegs upside-down through the bottom, making a small table; Jeanine methodically covered hers with solid color; and April's seemed a study in color and form. Each was completely absorbed in his or her own design.

> *"There is no limit to what can be learned, but also there is no comparative evaluation which makes children feel more or less capable than their peers. Understanding grows naturally as children work with materials and explore their properties."* (Brown)

Chapter Seven

Stretching

"They might get ketchup and mustard on the lights"

During story time Elga read a book about astronauts in space. The children laughed at the upside-down people and floating equipment. Elga challenged them to imagine the problems of eating lunch in space. There was a lot of whispering and several hands went up.

"If they used pepper it could float around and get in their eyes."

"They might get ketchup and mustard on the lights."

"They need tape to stick things down."

"I'm hearing some people who want to talk and some who want to listen," Elga said. "What should we do?"

"The people who want to talk can go out there and the people who want to listen can stay in here," Jeannine offered. Everyone quieted down as the group deliberated the effects of making a peanut butter sandwich without gravity.

Later, Peter built an elaborate labrynth of blocks on the floor. Soon other children were walking along the "tracks."

"Building things other people enjoy helps Peter with his shyness," Elga said. She mentioned to Peter that arrows could show walkers which direction to turn. So Peter began drawing arrows. "He needs to work on small muscle coordination," she explained. Soon the track was lined with arrows, which Elga practiced following. "But I don't know where to stop," she sighed.

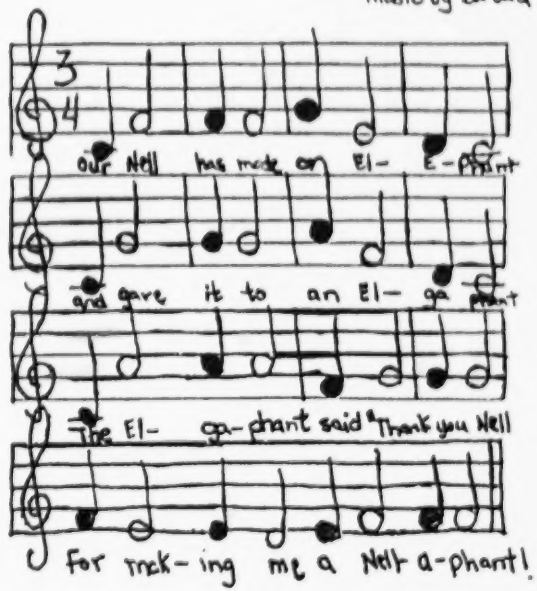
Peter asked Jim how to spell "STOP," and between themselves they made a sign. I appreciated how readily they turned to each other as teachers.

"Look at our mirror art," Elga said. As she moved a hinged mirror over a picture, the edges of a child's drawing were extended or the image multiplied, creating a kaleidoscope effect. "Kids investigate how to make their drawings change shape with the mirrors."

"Last week Nell built a paper elephant and drew a picture of it. Then we made up a song about it and wrote that down," Elga said.

Our Nell has made an elephant
And gave it to the Elgaphant
The Elgaphant said "Thank you Nell"
For making me a Nellephant.

Picture by Nell

words by Nell + Elga
music by Barbara

As we finished talking, I asked Elga for suggestions about how to incorporate some of her techniques into my new job (I will soon begin work as an artist in the elementary schools).

"But, of course, I can't tell you anything," she said, leaning back in her chair, "it will have to be a special use of you."

Conclusion

Elga Brown's program sits far at this end of the developmental/directive spectrum. Her environment contains open-ended materials, playing with which encourages development of various physical and cognitive skills. The materials are arranged to promote critical thinking, invention, creativity, and sharing. In her classroom, children learn to resolve problems between themselves. Direction and discipline are encouraged in each child, truly making everyone both teacher and student. What, then, are the specific functions of a facilitator? Brown, in her proposal for an alternative kindergarten, explains:

> The role of the teacher in this kind of program is as a careful observer of the children in action to assess their skill level and their particular interests. She/he restructures the environment according to the observations, asks questions designed to help children extend their observations or to help them formulate new questions for themselves.

Leonora Cohen, assistant professor in the University of Oregon's Gifted and Talented Program, has this to say about Elga's way with children:

> Elga helps students become engaged in learning activities. She helps them "fall in love" with their work. As she follows her own curiosity in the classroom, setting the example of how to inquire, explore, and transform materials, she becomes a model for the children of someone with an active mind. A person enjoying daily creations and discoveries.

Elga's curriculum remains embedded in each day's projects and discoveries. Hence, children may be practicing language skills while explaining a numbers game, or learning cooperation while measuring out ingredients together. Advanced concepts and specialized knowledge emerge regularly from an extension of self-chosen activities, from expansive, open-ended questioning, and from the nourishment of natural curiosity and imagination. As Brown explains in her proposal,

> The curriculum is a combination of the environment planned by the teacher and the special interests brought by the student; each part is responsive to and changed by the others.

Rather than impose rules or goals, individual growth and group cooperation create their own criteria. The satisfaction of learning motivates children to become self-disciplined and socially aware. Following their own interests leads to greater self-confidence and empowerment, and thus to less need for external reinforcement.

Cohen explains it this way: "When children are absorbed in meaningful play, much of their restlessness vanishes; it becomes energy directed into their task, so there is less need to worry about destructive behavior."

Any child is welcome in the class, provided their parents have visited first. Grouping by interest or ability happens naturally, as children pursue their chosen activities, but there are no individuals labelled "advanced" or "remedial." Each child develops at his or her own rate, and the progress of one child is not judged against the others. This practice corresponds with Cohen's view that every child has the right to sometimes be with others of the same ability and who have similar interests. Every child has the right to belong. "If, during their first exposure to it, children feel they 'fit' into school, that it's a good place for them to be, this can nourish them through twelve years of any kind of curriculum," Cohen said.

And, of course, the whole show is fueled by the irrefutable urge to play, as Fromberg has written:

> For young children, play in school, like anywhere else, is a way to strengthen worthwhile meaningful learning and cooperation with others rather than merely acquiring facts alone.... As a moral issue, the role of play as a part of early education touches the development of competence, a sense of self-worth and efficacy, creative potential, problem-solving skills, social learning, cognitive learning, linguistic development, and the sheer joy of living fully. (quoted in Oregon Department of Education, *Kindergarten Curriculum*)

"What happens in Elga's class," observes Superintendent Nichols, "comes closest to ballet. It's extremely difficult. Every movement is thought out and rehearsed, but what you see seems spontaneous and magical.....a dancing from the heart."

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Margaret Nichols, Superintendent, 4-J School District, Eugene, Oregon. Interview, March 1, 1988.

Appendix

"What Should Young Children Be Learning?"

Lilian G. Katz

an ERIC Digest prepared by
the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary
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ERIC Digest

What Should Young Children Be Learning?

Lilian G. Katz

Recent research on intellectual and social development and learning is rich in implications for curriculum and teaching strategies for early childhood education. Unfortunately, educational practices tend to lag behind what is known about teaching and learning. This digest discusses curriculum and the methods of teaching which best serve children's long-term development.

The Nature of Development

The concept of development includes two dimensions: the normative dimension, concerning the capabilities and limitations of most children at a given age, and the dynamic dimension, concerning the sequence and changes that occur in all aspects of the child's functioning as he grows. It also addresses the cumulative effects of experience. While the normative dimension indicates what children can and cannot do at a given age, the dynamic dimension raises questions about what children should or should not do at a particular time in their development in light of possible long-term consequences.

In many preschool programs and kindergartens, young children are engaged in filling out worksheets, reading from flash cards or reciting numbers in rote fashion. But just because young children can do those things, in a normative sense, is not sufficient justification for requiring them to do so. Young children usually do willingly most things adults ask of them. But their willingness is not a reliable indicator of the value of an activity. The developmental question is not, What can children do? Rather it is, What should children do that best serves their development and learning in the long term?

Learning Through Interaction

Contemporary research confirms the view that young children learn most effectively when they are engaged in interaction rather than in merely receptive or passive activities. Young children should be interacting with adults, materials and their surroundings in ways which help them make sense of their own experience and environment. They should be investigating and observing aspects of their environment worth learning about, and recording their findings and observations through talk, paintings and drawings. Interaction that arises in the course of such activities provides a context for much social and cognitive learning.

Four Categories of Learning

The four categories of learning outlined below are especially relevant to the education of young children:

- Knowledge. In early childhood, knowledge consists of facts, concepts, ideas, vocabulary, and stories. A child acquires knowledge from someone's answers to his questions, explanations, descriptions and accounts of events as well as through observation.
- Skills. Skills are small units of action which occur in a relatively short period of time and are easily observed or inferred. Physical, social, verbal, counting and drawing skills are among a few of the almost endless number of skills learned in the early years. Skills can be learned from direct instruction and improved with practice and drill.
- Feelings. These are subjective emotional states, many of which are innate. Among those that are learned are feelings of competence, belonging, and security. Feelings about school, teachers, learning and other children are also learned in the early years.
- Dispositions. Dispositions can be thought of as habits of mind or tendencies to respond to certain situations in certain ways. Curiosity, friendliness or unfriendliness, bossiness, and creativity are dispositions or sets of dispositions rather than skills or pieces of knowledge. There is a significant difference between having writing skills and having the disposition to be a writer.

  Dispositions are not learned through instruction or drill. The dispositions that children need to acquire or to strengthen—curiosity, creativity, cooperation, friendliness—are learned primarily from being around people who exhibit them. It is unfortunate that some dispositions, such as being curious or puzzled, are rarely displayed by adults in front of children.

  A child who is to learn a particular disposition must have the opportunity to behave in a manner that is in keeping with the disposition.

When that occurs, the child's behavior can be responded to, and thus strengthened. Teachers can strengthen certain dispositions by setting learning goals rather than performance goals. A teacher who says, "I want to see how much you can find out about something," rather than, "I want to see how well you can do," encourages children to focus on what they are learning rather than on their performance, and how others will judge their performance.

Risks of Early Academic Instruction

Research on the long-term effects of various curriculum models suggests that the introduction of academic work into the early childhood curriculum yields good results on standardized tests in the short term, but may be counterproductive in the long term. For example, the risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age will undermine children's dispositions to be readers. It is clearly not useful for a child to learn skills if, in the process of acquiring them, the disposition to use them is lost. On the other hand, obtaining the disposition without the requisite skills is not desirable either. Results from longitudinal studies suggest that curricula and teaching methods should be designed to optimize the acquisition of knowledge, skills, desirable dispositions and feelings.

Another risk of introducing young children to academic work prematurely is that those who cannot relate to the tasks required are likely to feel incompetent. Students who repeatedly experience difficulties may come to consider themselves stupid and may bring their behavior into line accordingly.

Variety of Teaching Methods

Academically focused curricula for preschool programs typically adopt a single pedagogical method dominated by workbooks, drill and practice. It is reasonable to assume that when a single teaching method is used for a diverse group of children, a significant proportion of these children are likely to fail. The younger the children are, the greater the variety of teaching methods there should be, since the younger the group is, the less likely the children are to have been socialized into a standard way of responding to their environment, and the more likely it is that the children's readiness to learn is influenced by background experiences which are idiosyncratic and unique.

For practical reasons there are limits to how varied teaching methods can be. It should be noted, however, that while approaches dominated by workbooks often claim to individualize instruction, they really individualize nothing more than the day on which a child completes a routine task. Such programs can weaken the disposition to learn.

As for the learning environment, the younger the children are, the more informal it should be. Informal learning environments encourage spontaneous play and cooperative effort. In spontaneous play, children engage in whatever play activities interest them. Cooperative effort occurs when children engage in such activities as group projects, investigations, and constructions.

Conclusion

Spontaneous play is not the only alternative to early academic instruction. The data on children's learning suggests that preschool and kindergarten experiences require an intellectually oriented approach in which children interact in small groups as they work together on projects which help them make sense of their own experience. These projects should also strengthen their dispositions to observe, experiment, inquire, and examine more closely the worthwhile aspects of their environment.

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